

couldn't fit it into a publishing slot. It wasn't about anything old enough, is the way they put it.

"If it was about bordellos in the gold rush they might have been interested. But I didn't want to write about bordellos in the gold rush. As far back as I wanted to go would be those women reformers trying to clean up same, and the publishers wouldn't have been interested in that at all. Women who are strong moral forces don't loom large in American publishing."

She had written another "trunk novel," to use her expression, before *Catch the Shadows*. "It was a really horrible book about my days in Haight-Ashbury, and it's concerned with drug dealing. That one lives in a box in the closet because I just can't bear to throw it away."

"But that awful novel had the germ of a good story in it. There was one character who did kind of come alive, and the occasional paragraph was decent. But basically it's so clumsy. I hadn't written anything but letters for ten years when I started to write that. I didn't know how you structure a book, how you pace it, how long the descriptions should be, how long the dialogue should be. In that book it was all wrong. Anyone, if they start to write something, is going to get it all wrong because they haven't practised. It's like learning to water-ski or ride a horse; you're going to fall off."

"Some people come into writing with the attitude that they can't allow themselves to fall. But learning to put up with failure is the essence of technique. If I'd got half way through that first novel and said, 'That's it, it's terrifying; I'm never going to write again,' I wouldn't have become a good writer and there would be no Deverry series, etcetera, etcetera."

Kerr's first fantasy novel was published when she was 42. Was that an advantage in the sense that by that time she had something to write about? "Yes, I definitely do think that. I hope this isn't going to offend my younger readers, but, you know, when I was in my 20s the things I wrote were relatively clever but utterly empty. They certainly never would have been published."

Because the human heart I knew not of. So I think the wait was worth it, quite frankly."

Her breakthrough came, she believes, with the realization that she had to totally immerse herself in her created worlds. This added the necessary verisimilitude. "Having come up with the basic idea and characters for Deverry, I asked myself the questions, 'Who are these people? How did they get here? Where are these countries?' The first four volumes grew out of those questions and made some attempt to answer them."

"It's to do with this famous thing of suspending disbelief, both in the readers and myself. Because when you study for instance a magical system, like the one used by the Golden Dawn I mentioned, you can see it has great interior meaning even today. But to actually believe that people could turn themselves into giant birds and fly means suspending my own disbelief. I have to do that to write it believably. If I don't believe it, no one else is going to. It comes down to that."

"Then again, to write *Polar City Blues* convincingly, I had to suspend my disbelief in psionics. I really don't believe people can mindspeak the way characters in the book did. So the basic question you ask yourself is, 'Assuming it's true, how would it work?' In fantasy, or science fiction, you take an assumption and 'believe' in that assumption and ask how it would work. Then you ask yourself how it extends into the story."

"You have to live it. One of my favourite stories about people living in their books concerns Joseph Conrad. He was writing a book set in the tropics, in a London winter back in the 1880s, right after the eruption of Krakatoa had lowered the temperature. It was the coldest winter for three hundred years or something. But he got so hot he stripped to his undershorts and caught pneumonia! He was sure he was in the tropics, writing away, and his wife came in to find him feverish and pale. For that time he was working on the story he believed it was that hot. I can get almost that involved myself."

Fantasy has been criticized for being overly self-referential. How easy is it to break out of those conventions? Indeed,

how desirable is it to do so? "I think it's very desirable. The quest is one of the archetypes I think most critics have in mind, and there is no quest in my books. The thing is that when you break away from the quest you don't sell as much, because that's what a large portion of these male readers want. I think it's an archetype that speaks to the modern male, and to some women, too. But there is something about the boy end of that scale, like 15-to-20 years old, say, which needs that archetype. It's like a spiritual vitamin of some sort."

"The feeling of a band of brothers that unites in this very moral world seems an important need. And the position of women in this kind of fiction is interesting too. They are just as good as men but they're not a sexual threat of any kind. The male characters get away from their home society but end up saving that home society. This seems to be in some way very important to young men. It definitely has informed a lot of fantasy fiction. And maybe the men who write fantasy need it themselves."

"So, although I certainly don't try to exclude male readers, I've always got a female audience in the back of my mind because I figure we've been slighted in the past. But addressing women's concerns means you don't get the publicity and promotion because it doesn't fit this male model. And you probably don't get the sales, as I say. I don't much care, although one of the difficulties in a writer's life is usually financial. But if you write a quest – boom! – instant reward. Assuming you write it under a male name, of course."

"This male/female thing is to a large extent the lingering influence of John W. Campbell. I mean, sexist doesn't even begin to describe him; misogynist would be a better word. Misogynist and of course very racist as well. He had a great deal of influence in the field and he didn't publish women in his magazine (*Astounding*, later *Analog*) and that was that."

Wasn't Kerr once encouraged to publish something under a male pseudonym herself? "Yes, *Polar City Blues*." What did she have to say about that? "I called the editor concerned a bleeding little sod, actually. I was so mad, because the central character in the book is a

Earth. The lounge was almost empty, and very still. Present were only myself, Alan, and some previous acquaintance of his who was drunk, and was distressing him with ebullient, demanding comradeship."

It gave me some satisfaction to see Alan thus rewarded for his taste in conversation. While his "friend" was absent in the toilet he hurriedly emptied his glass. "I think I'll go round the back and try out the bowling club," he said, and walked quickly out.

To my sensibilities his decision was as brave as Christopher Columbus's. The bowling clubhouse has a restricted membership and arriving alone, unaccompanied by a member, he should not even be admitted, by the rules. Myself I had never even considered trying to go there. Such is my cowardly addiction to familiar places that I had only the vaguest idea of how it might be reached, surrounded as it is by hedges and fences. For these reasons it was invested with the glamour of a secret society in my mind, a forbidden dell in the forest, a club *in camera*. That Alan was prepared to breach these barriers if he could came as one of those surprises which his personality presented from time to time.

In less than an hour he was back, trusting his tormentor to have departed (which he had). "What was it like?" I asked him.

"All right. But it's as empty as here. Only one or two people there."

It seemed that no one had questioned his presence. He had not even been asked to sign the visitors' book. I listened to his account with fascination, as though he were describing a journey to another continent. I imagined him negotiating the difficult transition to the clubhouse by the light of the sinking sun – by what route I had no idea. I imagined the scene in the hidden chamber. There would be a fading quality to it, I thought. The light would be failing. The people there would not speak, only stare vacantly. They would seem distant – *different*, as though the place belonged to another universe having only a tenuous connection with our own.

A few days later I confessed these private impressions to Alan. He knew immediately what I was talking about. He even had a name for it: *back-sense*. "When you get a parcel through the post and don't know what's in it, that parcel becomes magical, the essence of Christmas," he said. "If somewhere seems out of bounds to you, even if it is only a back room in a pub which you think of as someone else's territory, then it has a special glamour. That's *back-sense*. It contributes more to our general perception of the world than you might think. People see ghosts through *back-sense*."

"So ghosts aren't real, then?" I said with a smile.

"Of course they are real. *Back-sense* is real. It provides the backdrop to the cruder role of sensory perception."

"Well, at any rate you didn't find any ghosts in the Wendy House," I joked.

The Wendy House is the local colloquialism for the Bowling Green Clubhouse. Why, I have never discovered. Since a Wendy House is a play house of a size to accommodate children but too small to admit adults, I have surmised it was coined by some wag on seeing members' children running about one

sunny afternoon. Privately, the name had only reinforced my feeling of exclusivity.

Alan was looking at me sidelong. "Oh, there are ghosts there. More than you can ever imagine."

"I thought you said all ghosts came here, in the Bell."

"Yes, the ghosts of all the dead. But there are ghosts of a second kind, who don't come here. The ghosts of all those who have never lived, and never will."

He swallowed some beer. "You realize what a ghost is, don't you? What spirit is? It is the *kosmos's* memory."

I laughed shortly. "The universe is a *thing*. It doesn't have a memory."

"But it does," he reproved. "Haven't you read Plato's *Timaeus*? The *kosmos* consists of *soma*, or body, and *psyche*. The essential thing about *psyche* is memory. Without it you wouldn't even know who you are. In the same way the *kosmos* wouldn't be *kosmos* – wouldn't be order. Wouldn't be able to produce anything."

"Well what's this about people who never existed? How can it remember those?"

"Take a pack of ordinary playing cards. Do you know the number of possible permutations of those fifty-two cards?"

"Yes. Factorial fifty-two."

"Is that what it's called? Anyway I'm told it's greater than the estimated number of particles in the whole universe. If we were to assume that every shuffle produces a random ordering, then in the whole history of playing cards it's most unlikely that any one permutation has ever occurred twice. Or ever will."

I could see what was coming. "Now I suppose you are going to throw human DNA at me."

"Yes. Think how much vaster than the permutations of playing cards are the permutations of human genes. For every person who has or ever will exist, there are billions who might have existed but never will. The *kosmos* carries a knowledge of these unrealized people – a sort of pre-memory. These ghosts are far more attenuated and remote than the ghosts of the once-living, of course, and they crowd into the Wendy House. Some of them would like to be alive, you see, but the closest they can come to it is to be as near as possible to the ghosts of the dead. They would come to the Bell itself if they could, but a barrier separates the real from the potential, and they can't cross it."

"So they spend their time playing bowls, I suppose."

"Actually you are very nearly right. Being a games club as well as a social club makes it easier for them to congregate there. Ghosts of that kind spend most of their time playing games. They can't engage in the real world, you see."

Thoughtfully he added, "This is what the notion 'spirit' actually means. It's simply all the possible orderings of existing material objects, such as atoms. That's why they say that the world of spirit is greater than the world of matter."

This was a brilliant conception, though one which Alan, I suspected, had thought up on the spur of the moment. I would have pursued it further, but just then he turned from me and started talking to someone else. About football, I think.